

BOOK REVIEW

Justice and International Law in Meiji Japan: The María Luz Incident and the Dawn of Modernity

by **Giorgio Fabio COLOMBO**. New York: Routledge Press, 2023.
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For historians, the Meiji reforms were an event of the utmost importance in that they embodied the moment of Japan's transformation from feudalism to modernity, enabling Japan to confront the West as a global power in the early twentieth century. The reforms brought a different interpretation to a keen observer of the development of international law in a non-European space. Giorgio Fabio Colombo's meticulous research tracing the development of international law in imperial Japan in the late nineteenth century is a fresh contribution to the literature regarding the history of international law. Inspired by the María Luz incident in 1872, which altered Japan's role in global affairs, Colombo narrates his compelling account of Japan's ascendancy as a late bloomer to the international legal system. In the Japanese academic lexicon, international law was known as "*Bankokukouhou*", an expression the Japanese borrowed from the Chinese translation of Whaeton's "*History of International Law*", and in their journey to modernity the Japanese perceived international law as a mandatory tool with which to be admitted into the international legal system. Thus, international law has been integral to Japan's development.

Before tracing the trajectories that led to the María Luz incident. In Chapter 1, Colombo gives an apt description of Japan's yearning to adopt international law as the Japanese elite started to appreciate the power of legal weapons to accomplish their ends. Chapter 2 presents the María Luz case, whereby a ship sailing under the Peruvian flag entered Japanese territory and created a diplomatic dispute, which eventually elevated the independence of the Japanese judiciary, as this particular episode demonstrated their mastery of legal acumen before the Western powers. The case is still mentioned on many occasions today to show Japan's longstanding engagement with international justice.

Quoting the British jurist, Sir Edmund Hornby, Colombo states that "Japan had an opportunity of asserting herself as a new member of the Comity of the Nations due to Maria Luz incident" (p. 303).¹ In Chapter 3, Colombo unveils criminal procedure ambiguities confronted by Japan as Japan attempted to legitimize her position as a state with a proper legal order. Notably, Japan was the first Asian nation to adopt an international dispute resolution system, with the first matter being mutually agreed by both Japan and

¹ Edmund Grimani HORNBY, *Sir Edmund Hornby: An Autobiography* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1928) at 303.

Peru to be arbitrated by the Czar of Russia in St Petersburg. Although María Luz remains the cardinal point of this book, it astutely signifies the admittance of Japan to the system of international law and the work deserves to be praised for its originality based on archival materials. However, it could have been a much more critical piece if the author had questioned how dubiously Japan used unequal treaties, a method they learnt from the West to oppress China on the question of Manchuria during that same period.

Competing interests. The author declares none.